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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE BISHOP OF SOUTHERN OHIO

Tuesday, April 07, 2009

The Rt. Rev. Thomas E. Breidenthal
Bishop of Southern Ohio

Dear Thomas:

I am alarmed by your March 31, 2009 letter regarding Kevin Thew Forrester's fitness for his episcopal election.

If I am accurate in my reading of why you refuse to consent to his election, you maintain that unless a person holds the same view of a theology of atonement that you do, they have no right to be a bishop. "Being alarmed" does not come close to the emotion I know by your position in this matter.

The theological issue you raise has to do with the question of what did God wrought on that Good Friday through the death of my Lord, Jesus. You maintain: *the conviction at the heart of our faith tradition, namely, that we are in bondage to sin and cannot get free without the rescue God has offered us in Jesus, who shouldered our sins on the cross.*

And you maintain that: *he (Kevin) appears to be settled in his conviction that our relation to Christ is not about salvation from a condition of objective alienation from God, but about a more realized union with God.*

My alarm is simply this: are you attempting to stifle and/or eliminate a theological discussion that is as old as our faith tradition? Are you attempting to say that the Augustinian view of Original Sin is the only game in town? You and I could cite theologian after theologian who disagreed with one another over this pivotal issue of our nature--and the corresponding issue of the nature of God's grace--and what occurred on Good Friday--and what was consummated on Easter morning, but the primary point of my entreaty to you is that we should welcome the debate. I find it reprehensible to even think of denying you access to the floor of the House of Bishops because of your theological belief about atonement. In the same vein, I find it reprehensible to think of your denying Kevin Thew Forrester access to the floor of the House of Bishops because of his

theological views on this pivotal issue. I also believe you are naïve if you think Kevin is a lone voice about union and communion with God through Christ being THE cardinal tenet for our understanding of salvation. Irenaeus comes to mind and there are more....and more....and more.

One of my fondest heroes in my twenty years in the House of Bishops was Bennett Sims. Bennett was a great admirer of Pelagius, that irascible and wise opponent of Augustine of Hippo, and Bennett often would proclaim it time for a heresy (Pelagianism) to be revisited for the sake of truth seeking. Bennett was ever the guardian of digging deeper and exploring more widely the parameters of our blessed faith tradition, and the House of Bishops was more attentive to one another and wiser because of him.

You may be right about those things that matter most to you, but you do not have the right to turn off the faucet of discussion and discernment in our quest for the truth. I have been a bishop for twenty eight years and I fear for the environment of our great Church when lines are drawn in the sand as you have done with Kevin's consent process and proclaim that a good Christian person does not have the right to pursue his quest for truth as a bishop.....even when elected overwhelmingly by his brothers and sisters in Christ in a diocese he has served faithfully for eight years.

If you prevail and Kevin's election is not agreed to, what is the next litmus test to be? And perhaps the telling question is: if you prevail and Kevin's election is not agreed to, what word do you have for the people of Northern Michigan? I would suggest you cut us all some slack and withdraw your opposition to Kevin's election. In so doing you would add a moment of grace to a Communion that, I believe, is in search of openness and transparency, not inquisitional standards employed through the consent process.

Thank you for your attention, and I wish you well. I am

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Rustin,
Assisting Bishop for the Diocese of Alaska